

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

By Richard Dufour

The term “professional learning community” is used to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education. In fact, the term has been used so universally that it is in danger of losing all meaning. Initial enthusiasm can give way to confusion, followed by implementation problems, abandonment, and the search for a new initiative. Educators can avoid this cycle only if they understand the “Big Ideas” that represent core PLC principles and how they can sustain the PLC model until it becomes the school’s culture.

BIG IDEA #1

ENSURING THAT STUDENTS LEARN

The PLC model assumes that the core mission of formal education is to ensure that students learn. When schools take the mission statement “learning for all” as a pledge to ensure the success of each student, profound changes occur. The school established a solid foundation of shared knowledge and a common ground that will allow them to move the improvement initiative forward. As the school progresses, every professional in the building must engage in the ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that will drive the work of the PLC:

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experienced difficulty in learning?

When a school functions as a PLC, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing timely, intervention-based strategies to ensure that struggling students receive the time and support they need to succeed.

BIG IDEA #2

A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Educators building a PLC recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote the powerful, collaborative culture that characterizes a PLC: a systematic process in which teachers work together in teams to analyze and improve their classroom practice, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. Their collaborative conversations require team members to make goals, strategies, materials, questions, concerns, and results public. These discussions are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively.

BIG IDEA #3

A FOCUS ON RESULTS

PLCs judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Every teacher participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. The results-oriented PLC then turns this data into useful and relevant information for staff.

Educators who focus on results must also shift their attention to goals that focus on student learning. They must stop assessing their own effectiveness based on how busy they are and instead ask, “Have we made progress on the goals that are most important to us?”

HARD WORK AND COMMITMENT

Initiating and sustaining the PLC model concept requires hard work. A school staff must focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold its members accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. When educators work hard to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn will improve. The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

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